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A Preferred Vision for Administering Elementary Schools: a Reflective Essay

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A Preferred Vision for Administering Elementary Schools: a Reflective Essay

Abstract

When I began my journey on the road to an administrative degree, I knew that being a principal would be a difficult one. I also knew it would be a job I could do and definitely wanted to try. Brubaker (1995) stated that, "Principals are "can do" people"(p. 92). This is a quote which has validated my beliefs that principals make things happen.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
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When I began my journey on the road to an administrative degree, I knew that being a principal would be a difficult one. I also knew it would be a job I could do and definitely wanted to try.

Brubaker (1995) stated that, "Principals are "can do" people"(p. 92). This is a quote which has validated my beliefs that principals make things happen.

I had envisioned my job would be dealing strictly with management type of issues. I had not taken into consideration the concepts instructional leadership, public relations, and staff development. I had not taken into consideration the students we are now serving and the change in family structure. This change has increased the pressure on a school district to become the nucleus for the development of the child. I had not taken into consideration what my role would be, not only in the school, but also in the community. I now realize that an administrative position requires much more than I ever anticipated.

In my first administrative class, Introduction to Educational Administration, we had a guest speaker who shared this quote, "Excellence is a journey NOT a destination"! R. Spears (personal communication, October 18, 1994). As a future administrator, I want to be a part of this journey. It is my goal to help all children learn. I want to make a difference in the lives of children. I want to create an atmosphere where students are excited about learning and teachers are excited about teaching. I want to assist children in understanding the

importance of becoming lifelong learners. I want to assist teachers in creating energized classrooms. I want to create an environment with parents, students, teachers, and community people working together to establish a nurturing learning environment where children feel they are loved and secure. I want to be a leader in the school transformation process as we approach the 21st century. Upon completion of reading Leading With Soul, (Bolman and Deal, 1995) I understand it is my responsibility as a principal not to give answers but to raise questions, suggest directions, to explore, and to offer support.

Many experiences have affected my beliefs in the educational system. These experiences, all combined, have allowed and encouraged me to pursue a degree in educational administration. These experiences are my involvement with education as a student, a teacher, and a parent; my personal characteristics, the preparation I received in the Educational Administration graduate program, and my personal vision for educational leadership. These four components have shaped me into the person I am today and will be the driving force of the role I play as a future administrator.

My educational experiences began right from my start in life. Education was strongly instilled in my early years and by sixth grade, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I had parents who were committed to education. They worked with the school to create a positive learning environment for their children. My parents took the educational process very seriously and I was expected to do the same. My father

often said, "Education is to be valued, not taken for granted." It was always instilled in us that our education was a privilege and we were told to do our best to succeed and excel. My parents had high expectations for me. These expectations have influenced my choices, my behavior, and my value of education.

I see myself expecting the same from my children. I require them to take their education very seriously and to reap all the possible benefits available to them. I expect them to do their best and acquire the most they possibly can from their educational experiences.

I am the oldest of four children and with that rank in birth order, I was always placed in leadership roles. I took those responsibilities very seriously. I was often put in charge and I knew I had to make the right choices because my parents depended on and trusted me. It was at this point in time, I began to like the responsibilities my parents entrusted to me. I began to acquire confidence and felt very comfortable with my part in the decision making process in my family.

Characteristics

The characteristics implanted in me when I was growing up will be the building blocks which I will draw upon as a future principal. First, I have a dedication and commitment to educating all children. I believe all children need to be in an environment where positive guidance and interaction takes place. This positive interaction will help students develop a sound base on which they will continue to

grow. This creation of a positive environment is crucial in order to make headway in the educational process. Having taught in a climate that was filled with negativism and a leader who did not possess the same child-focused philosophy as the school district, I saw, first hand, the adverse effects this attitude had on students. Educational leaders must create environments where mistakes are made and opportunities and guidance is there to rectify those mistakes. This experience has validated my belief that principals serve as leaders in setting a positive climate. Bolman and Deal (1995) stated in their book Leading With Soul, "a vision of leadership rooted in the enduring sense of wisdom, courage, and compassion are needed"(p. 167). Administrators must have a commitment to share their learning and educational expertise with others.

Secondly, I believe my enthusiasm and love for education will play an instrumental part in helping me to motivate educators. In my current position, as a kindergarten teacher, I often take on leadership roles. I am often involved with committee work which allows me to work with a variety of people. I am enthusiastic and willing to take on the challenge of completing a task when given the opportunity to do so. I often take the initiative to be a part of school transformation and the decision-making process. As a future leader, I must possess the ability to radiate enthusiasm in fulfilling the ultimate goal; what is best for students. This is an on-going process and a process where teachers and administrators must collaborate to achieve this goal.

Educational leaders are obligated to promote professional development. Through this promotion we can impact students positively. When professional development exists, we encourage effective teaching. Effective teachers recognize the multiple teaching and learning styles. Effective teachers generate enthusiasm in their classroom and take a personal responsibility for the curriculum they deliver. Through my enthusiasm about education, it is my hope to assist educators in fostering an enthusiastic learning environment. I truly believe we can positively impact students through the growth obtained in professional development.

Thirdly, my organizational skills, my conscientiousness, and honesty will impact my effectiveness as a principal. People look for leaders who are credible and ethical not only in their leadership position, but in all areas of their lives. When poor leadership takes place, I believe apathy among faculty and staff begins to occur. An effective leader must have heart, hope, and faith rooted in soul and spirit (Bolman and Deal, 1995). Leaders must possess an understanding about the needs of their district. They must have a vision for the future of education and for their school. A school community wants leaders who are honest, straight-forward, competent, and supportive. These traits contribute to the effectiveness of an administrator.

I have a basic understanding that a community wants someone to be in an administrative position who is there to improve the school

and to work to achieve what is best for those involved. I understand teachers, students, and parents want a leader with integrity and credibility.

Lastly, my desire to accept the challenge of an administrative position will assist in my effectiveness on the job. A leader who is open minded and willing to meet the challenges of administration, is taking the first step to becoming an effective leader. I possess the desire to work with students, teachers, and parents in creating an environment that is conducive to preparing students for the 21st century. This challenge will be achieved through the commitment of all to a variety of aspects of the school scene.

Reflections On Academic Encounters

As I reflect on my strong beliefs of education and begin to prepare myself as to what my role will be as a future administrator, I feel I am continually gaining insight to assist me in this role. I feel this will be a continual, learning process all the way through my administrative career. My beliefs and the knowledge I have obtained through my educational journey will guide me to be an effective leader.

The first course I took in the Educational Administration graduate program was Introduction to Educational Administration. In this course, the word vision became a pertinent administrative word. Robin Spears (personal communication, October 18, 1994) shared with us this favorite quote, "Vision without action is merely a dream,

action without vision is just passing time, vision with action will change the world"(Barker, J.). This was my first encounter of what vision is and I have continued to develop my ideas and philosophies as I have progressed through the program. I have learned a school's vision can not be thoughts and beliefs of a single person, but shared ideas, thoughts, and beliefs for a school system. As stated by Bolman & Deal (1995), "Administrators can't think of themselves as the sole source of the vision, it must be a collaborative affair"(p.136). We learned that the principal's leadership style often dictates the direction of a building. Educational leadership requires good management but good management is not sufficient. Leaders are concerned with a vision of what is possible and desirable for them and others to achieve. Leaders bring to the organization and its work a certain freshness of thought, a commitment to new ideas, and a belief in creativity change (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, and Thurston, 1992). Lezotte (1994) found that people follow leaders because they share the same dreams, not because they are afraid of the consequences of not following. Dreams are significant in developing and maintaining a vision.

We discussed the different frames of reference administrators inherently operate from. I have worked for administrators who operate from the human resource frame all the way to the political frame. Each one of them had their own unique style and vision. I am most comfortable in working from the human resource frame. I see this

frame as my preferred style of leadership. I see the positive benefits and outcomes of interdependence between people and the schools. I realize the importance of utilizing peoples' strengths and their skills.

A great amount of pride and ownership takes place when the faculty and staff are involved in as many of the major decisions as possible. According to Lange (1993) a total district commitment is required for site based decision making to be effective. I believe that developing a vision with the staff is more beneficial and effective than developing a vision for the staff. According to Hicks (1996), it is necessary for the principal to give up control in order to empower teachers. This philosophy of site based decision making will assist a district in making decisions which will be best for all those involved.

I believe schools should exist to serve human needs. Schools need people and people need schools. I believe the consideration of people's attitudes and beliefs is important, that is why my preferred leadership style is the human resource frame. However, when I am pressed my preferred leadership style is structural. I want things organized. I think it is important to have expectations spelled out so everyone knows what they should be doing. I want policies and procedures written out that way there is no gray area and people know where they stand especially when controversial issues arise. I feel very strongly that structure is key in the educational process for students. However, when the structural style is the only leadership style the students become objects rather than people and often times, their needs

are overlooked. Therefore, the human resource side of me recognizes that without the students, schools wouldn't exist, they would just be empty buildings. I think everyone's needs must be looked at and a school system depends on each other to accomplish its goals and mission.

I believe the key aspect regarding leadership styles is understanding that it is not a matter of fitting into one frame or leadership style, but rather a need to understand the perspective each leadership style represents. I realize I must develop my own leadership style. If I were to mirror another person's style that would make me an extension of the individual and his/her philosophy and not someone with my own vision and purpose. These various leadership styles allow administrators to look at the various situations through different lenses. This open-minded approach will allow decisions to be made that will be the best for all those involved.

Educational leaders cannot be all things to all people, no person can. An administrator is a person willing to "...bring about enough balance among key competing values to make things work for teaching and learning because the qualities of reason, balance, purpose, and passion are embodied in their leadership" (Sergiovani, et al. 1992, p. 16). I feel administrators need to recognize the fact that the administrative career is challenging. The administrator must always strive to make the right decision in all situations but he/she must recognize these decisions will not always make everyone happy and

could cause some controversy. Administrators must work to frame situations so that the preferred outcome is what is best for the school as a whole (Selke, Laube, Lepley, Levine, Lindaman, Maze, Olson, Otkins, Timmerman, and Whittlesey, 1995). A significant aspect of creating a successful school is parent involvement, maybe even more importantly, community involvement. Dr. Dale Jackson (personal communication, October 25, 1995) affirmed many of my beliefs in the course *Schools and Community Relations*. I believe it is the responsibility of an entire community to educate a child. I believe children thrive in a school district where the entire community works together to accomplish meeting the needs of the children.

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. School and community partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and later in life (Epstein, 1995).

Dr. Jackson made it very clear that community involvement must go beyond volunteers in a classroom or business partners giving a donation. Community involvement is about giving ownership of schools to the community. When community members feel a sense of responsibility toward the school, they will collaborate with the educators to achieve the best for the students. Community

involvement must be two-dimensional, where both give and take. Community involvement must be an exchange process where both the school and community profit from the relationship.

The principal plays a vital role in the design and success of community involvement. The principal, through policies and actions, must embody the image the school wants to put forth to the community about children and their ability to learn and about the vital role of families in the learning process. According to the Iowa PTA (1995), it is often a challenge to get parents and the community involved. It is the principal's role to provide educational leadership for all members and to provide staff development in parent/community involvement. The principal will be the bridge between the school and the community.

In the class, Administration of the Elementary and Secondary School, Dr. Patricia Krysinski (personal communication, February 4, 1997) offered insight that I was not able to glean from a textbook. Dr. Krysinski synthesized females in leadership roles. Since I am a female moving toward a career in educational leadership, this perspective was very insightful. It allowed me to continually reflect on my leadership role and my vision as a female principal. The literature (Grimes, Sloan, 1984), validated my belief when women attempt to succeed in a field traditionally reserved for men. Women must face both the difficulties associated with competence and talents and the perceived violations of sex role norms. However, I believe overcoming these

obstacles and not allowing oneself to get caught up in it will allow the person to grow and flourish on the administrative path.

I learned principals are middle managers. "They are being expected to become active in curricular leadership in the school"(Fullan, 1991, pg. 152). Principals, whether men or women, are to perform as highly effective school leaders. The characteristics associated with effective leadership of schools should be continually fostered in both men and women.

In this course, we also put together an administrative conference for potential principals. This process allowed me to witness, first hand, group dynamics. From this conference, I was able to understand the importance of establishing a network of peers which I can call on for advice, suggestions, valuable insight, and morale support.

One of the most enlightening courses I took was Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction with Dr. Robert Decker (personal communication, July 10, 1997). Upon completion of this course, I was excited about the process of evaluation. I gleaned a wealth of information and insight which has offered a different perspective on evaluation and professional improvement.

This class assisted me in gathering information which will enable me to look at evaluations as professional growth plans and not as a threat to the teacher. These professional growth plans will help a teacher reflect and improve their teaching style.

The principal's role is to help develop effective teachers. The principal can guide the teacher to discover his/her strengths and weaknesses. This process can cultivate trust between the administrator and the teacher. Together, the teacher and the principal can develop a plan for professional development. This will help to ensure growth of all teachers, even the master teachers.

Personal, Professional Vision for Education Leadership

My vision for educational leadership begins with a leadership style which cultivates a belief where the decisions made are in the best interest for all those involved, students, teachers, parents, and others. As an administrator, I will attempt to accomplish this through communication, collaboration, and parental/community involvement.

All people involved in the system must depend on each other to accomplish it's goals and purposes. It is important to have the support of the faculty and to make sure everybody is going in the same direction with a common goal in mind. Being a teacher and working with teachers all day long, I know that we consider ourselves to be professionals and experts in our fields. We would like to have some type of input involving changes that will effect our jobs. We need to create a methodology for a more collaborative, "constructivist" process of change in schools and districts (Wagner, 1998). This collaborative approach must begin with honest and open communication.

Communication

I have witnessed, first hand, the importance of open communication. I think this approach attempts to assuage all the speculations that take place when there is no communication process. Communication needs to take place in formal and informal situations. School leaders must possess strong communication skills and must effectively articulate the school's vision and purpose. Administrators, teachers, and parents must use all the communication skills they possess to continue to collaborate when sharp differences of opinion arise (Swap, 1993).

I believe the school should be a place where the emphasis is on the integrity of ideas. Everyone in the school will speak and listen, as both are very important aspects of good communication, carefully to each other. This process will create a relationship of trust among the principal, teachers, students, and parents. This trust will assist in building a relationship between the community and the school.

Parent/Community Involvement

I see the principal as the bridge between the school, the community, and the parents. Involvement of parents is the key to school success. This involvement is critical to students doing well in school. When parents become actively involved, in their children's education, they start to develop ownership in their children's academic success.

The difficult part about parental involvement is conveying the importance of this to the parents. The attempts to get parents involved must go beyond weekly newsletters, room mothers, and parent-teacher conferences. Parents need to understand the importance of becoming an active partner in the education of their children.

The principals' role, according to the Iowa PTA (1995), is to establish a two-way communication between the school and the parents. The principal must also set a school climate which is positive, friendly, and open to the community. Often times parents want to be involved but are deterred because of school practices and administrative perceptions of parents (Sasser, 1991). Social, cultural, and economic issues also effect the number of parents who become involved, as well as the degree to which they become involved. Many parents are limited with time and availability due to work schedules. The chance of conflict can be minimized when the approach is open-minded and supportive from all angles.

The school needs to be instrumental in acquiring parents' involvement. The principal will play a key role in accomplishing this role. Through collaboration between the school and the parents, the ultimate goal will be accomplished. That goal being, what is best for students.

Collaboration

Since my preferred leadership style is the human resource frame, collaboration will play a huge part in my administration of a school.

Schools are experiencing change everyday and collaboration and collegiality are vital parts in school reform and restructuring. As schools work through the reform process, all those connected must be involved in the change process. In my opinion, all stakeholders need to be involved from beginning to end. This involvement will help to minimize unpleasant battles during the reform process if the style is bottom-up rather than top-down. Through continuous communication, this collaboration process will reduce the isolation of teachers and will allow the sharing of successful practices. When teachers and administrators work together this increases positive morale and enthusiasm, along with opening the door to many new and exciting ideas. Working together along with constant communication provides support. This support is necessary for completing a task.

I will not be a top-down administrator who is a dictator. I vision myself as a facilitator not as a leader who is controlling every decision and situation. I want to be someone who provides opportunities and guides teachers when they try new techniques in their classroom. I want to celebrate, with teachers and students, the successes they experience in education.

Collaborative work can take a long time to develop, this requires patience on the part of the building administrator. Therefore, the leader must have a passion for what he/she is doing. This is another component of the vision. There must be a commitment and enthusiasm for education. This approach must be visible from every

educator in the district. Educational environments must be exciting, conducive to optimal learning, and of utmost importance, positive. This positiveness will perpetuate positive attitudes from the students, as well. A positive, uplifting, and dynamic school climate will foster what is best for students. As a future school administrator, I will work to evolve a positive school climate where there are people who genuinely care about the students. The school will be a source for mutual respect; where hope and trust will cultivate.

In closing, what I value most is the children and the interaction with them. One of my greatest fears about becoming an administrator has been the possibility of losing the interaction with the students. I have this fear of moving further away from the students. However, as I conclude my educational process, I have come to the decision that this doesn't have to be the case. I will continue to interact and impact children, it will just be in a different way.

I realize my position as an administrator will be to guide people down the education path. It will not be my job to give answers but to raise questions, suggest areas to explore, and most importantly offer support, through the good and the bad. My favorite quote, which I feel is quite profound, that I found during my course work is "Heart, hope, and faith, rooted in soul and spirit are necessary for today's managers to become tomorrow's leaders"(Bolman and Deal, 1995, pg. 12). This is a great quote, on which to build an administrative philosophy and vision.

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